FACT SHEET

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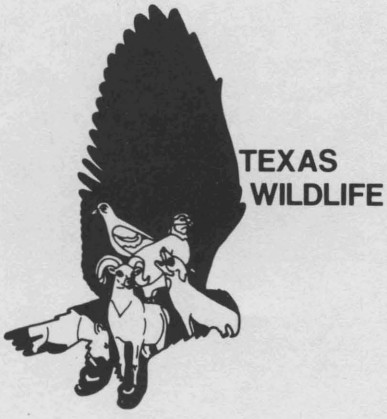


# NUTRIA

## (Myocaster coypus)

Charles W. Ramsey*

Nutria are native to South America. They were brought to North America in the early 1930's as a new fur bearing species, and were released in Louisiana marshes. A hurricane in Texas in 1941 scattered nutria throughout southwest Louisiana and southeast Texas. But the biggest dispersal occurred in the late 1940's, when nutria introductions were promoted as a quick means of aquatic weed control. The weed control programs were not successful but the nutria remained. Today nutria are found over most of the eastern half of Texas.

### Description

Nutria are large, stocky, brown-furred rodents resembling large rats. They are semiaquatic like beavers, but instead of broad, flat tails, nutria have long, round, scaly tails sparsely covered with bristle hairs. Nutria have webs between the inner four toes of their hind feet, but not the fifth, outer toe. Their small, black, unwebbed front feet are much smaller than their hind feet. They have large front teeth which range from yellow to dark orange.

The average nutria is about 24 inches long, with about a 16-inch tail. Nutria do not reach full growth before they are 1½ to 2½ years old. A large male may weigh 25 pounds and a non-pregnant female about 18 pounds, but most adults weigh about 10 pounds.

### Behaviour

Nutria are relatively docile. They are neither aggressive nor wary, and when disturbed usually try to escape rather than fight. But when captured or cornered their bite can cause serious injury.

Nutria scratch and groom themselves ritually. The forepaws are used for scratching and grooming and the free outer toes of the hind feet are used for combing themselves and cleaning their ears.

Nutria feed and are most active at night, but they also feed periodically during daylight hours, as prompted by hunger.

### Reproduction

Nutria mature sexually at 4 months of age where the food supply is good, but not until about 5 or 6 months of age where it is poor. However, most nutria do not breed until they are about 8 months old.

Under good conditions nutria have a high reproductive rate. The female is capable of producing two litters per year. Litter size varies from one to nine young, and the average number is five. Miscarriage is common, so only about half of all females successfully produce young.

Female nutria usually come into heat every 24 to 26 days, and stay in heat for 1 to 4 days. Heat begins 1 or 2 days after giving birth and 1 or 2 days after miscarriage. Males can breed at any time.

Courtship occurs just before the female is in heat, and is evidenced by chasing, playful fighting, wrestling and biting, and calls made by both sexes. Once the female is in heat, courtship is discontinued and breeding is prompt.

Nutria do not mate for life. A female may breed with one or several males each time she comes in heat. Nutria will breed both in and out of water.

The gestation period is about 130 days. The young are born fully furred, with their eyes open, and ready to swim shortly after birth. Newborn nutria weigh from 6 to 8 ounces.

In the female nutria, the teats are not on the belly but high on the side, along the line where the dark back hair begins. This allows the young

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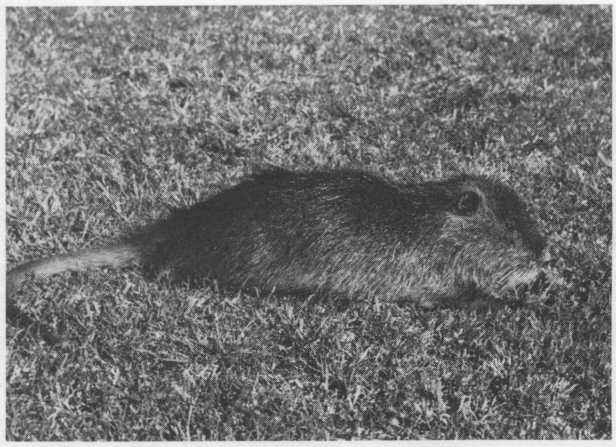

*The nutria resembles the beaver except that the tail is long and round.*

*The presence of nutria can be detected from their distinctive tracks. The outer toes on the hind feet are not webbed.*

to nurse while both mother and young are in the water. Most young are weaned at about 5 weeks of age.

### Habitat

Nutria prefer a semiaquatic habitat in swamps and marshes and along the shores of rivers and lakes. When hiding in the water, a nutria often will keep only its nose and eyes or the upper part of its head out of the water. Nutria can float with little or no body motion and can stay well hidden under sparse vegetation.

On land, the nutria appears slow and clumsy because its legs are scarcely long enough to keep its large body off the ground. But when frightened they can move quite rapidly. Nutria can climb high steep banks, root entanglements, gently sloping trees and wire fences.

Nutria often build platforms of vegetation for feeding, resting, nesting or hiding from danger or bad weather. Most platforms appear to result from piles of uneaten plant material at a favorite feeding site. These platforms occur wherever nutria live or feed.

During the summer nutria may make their home on the ground in dense vegetation, but the rest of the year they use burrows. Burrows are commonly located wherever there is sloping ground such as banks and levees, spoil areas or rolling marshland. Burrows are most common along banks with dense vegetation, and are rare in gently sloping banks without vegetation. Nutria often use burrows abandoned by armadillos, muskrats or other nutria.

Burrows may house a single nutria or family groups of several generations, and they vary from simple, one entrance burrows with short tunnels to very complex units with several multi-level entrances, tunnels and living compartments. The tunnels normally extend from 4 to 6 feet into the bank, but have been found as long as 50 to 150 feet.

Nutria are found in agricultural areas mostly during the summer. They come in when the growing season starts and leave again after harvest. Although nutria travel an average maximum distance of about 3 miles, some have reportedly traveled much greater distances.

### Food Habits

Nutria are almost exclusively vegetarians. Their dexterous forepaws enable them to locate food items, pick up handfuls of plants or grain or handle a single grain of rice. They eat about 2½ to 3½ pounds of food per day. Feeding habits of nutria vary considerably. They feed while in the water, on floating objects or on land. They will graze on grass like cattle or clip upright plants like rabbits.

Nutria seem to prefer the soft, succulent parts near the base of plants, especially when eating coarse plants such as cattail, cord grass and reeds. They also can live almost entirely on grasses such as bermudagrass or soft water plants such as duckweed. In agricultural areas, they eat the weeds and crops growing in planted fields. They will readily eat all root crops except white potatoes.

Except for man, nutria have very few natural enemies. In the Gulf Coast area, domestic and wild dogs and cats are the main predators. Weather probably causes the greatest losses of nutria.

### Reference

Evans, James. *About Nutria and Their Control.* U.S. Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife. Resource Publication No. 86, 1970.



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